

“It’s A Faith Thing” (John 20:19-31)

Every year this text from John falls on the second Sunday of Easter. You talk to any Associate Pastor and they will have a few sermons on this passage because Sr. Ministers always seem to take a vacation the week after Easter. So, my collection of sermons about Thomas continues to grow.

I have always wondered about this text. We have just celebrated one of God’s most magnificent acts. Jesus has just been resurrected from the dead and the trumpets are bellowing out in celebration, and yet there’s disbelief. It’s one of Jesus’ disciples, no less! It’s important to know that this story does not focus on doubt, but on faith. In this passage doubting is not the proper translation. The Greek words used are *apistos*, unbelieving or without trust and *pistos*, believing or trusting. Although many translations include “doubt,” thus how we have “Doubting Thomas,” there is no Greek word for “doubt” in this passage. So, this passage is about unbelieving (without faith) or believing (having faith).

Looking at our story it’s been a week since the resurrection and the disciples still don’t believe Mary’s announcement about Jesus appearing to her. They are gathered behind closed doors and did so out of fear that they might end up like Jesus, dead...

What are they doing? Jesus prepared them for his departure over and over again. He taught them how love one another, how to take chances, to trust in him, and to be the branches of his vine, and to be ready to follow him. It doesn’t look like as though they were paying attention. Look at them; they’re cowardly hiding behind closed doors. They should be dancing and shouting in the streets announcing the good news, CHRIST HAS RISEN! CHRIST HAS RISEN! Yet, they’re hiding hoping no one will find them.

Jesus appears with very formal greeting, “Peace be with you.” These words have an additional function than just a greeting to the disciples. Jesus is giving the gift of Peace to the disciples who are hiding behind closed doors out of “fear for their lives.” With his words Jesus reminds the disciples that they don’t have to face the Jewish authorities and crowds with anxiety, but with the Peace of Christ.

The disciples only receive the gift of peace after they recognize Jesus and then rejoiced. They were empowered by Jesus breathing on them the Holy Spirit, and sent them out into the community to continue their ministry with him. Jesus gives them New Life, and the gift of the Holy Spirit to sustain that New Life for their ministry.

The disciples only believe when Jesus appears to them and they see his hands and his side. It is only then they recognize the Lord and rejoice.

Thomas, with his disbelief, is acting no different than the rest of the disciples. Except that Thomas demands proof. He insists on seeing Jesus’ hands and side... I don’t know about you but Thomas grosses me out here, he wants to touch the nail marks in Jesus hands and put his hand in his side. Gross! I can deal with him wanting to see Jesus’ hands and side, but touching them... What Thomas is asking for is tangible evidence of the resurrection; it was what Jesus showed the other disciples....

Our story then informs us that Thomas wasn’t with the rest of the disciples when Jesus appeared to them the first time. We know that Thomas didn’t believe his fellow disciples when they told him, “The Lord has appeared to us!” Thomas makes his disgusting request of touching Jesus’ hands and side and says “**unless I see I will not**

believe!” Remember Thomas is not doubting, he is not believing. He is not certain. He has no faith.

It is at this point that Thomas is at a crossroad in his life. What will he become? What adjective will describe him: trusting or not, faithful or not, believing or not?

In my undergraduate studies I took a Psychology a class in childhood development. I learned that it is important for the child to learn how to trust their parents very early in their developmental process. If they don't learn or the parents don't earn the child's trust it can cause issues later on in their lives. I think it is the same with our faith.

John Westerhoff III in his book, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* gives an example of the three stages of building faith.

1st stage: **Experience Faith** (preschool & early childhood)

- is imitating actions.
- A child praying with his or her parents and not understanding the meaning of what they are saying and doing. But, they learn this is what we do and this is how we do it.
 - Another part of this imitating a group, they want to belong to a group (occurs in the early adolescent years). This is what we believe and do. This is our group or church.

2nd stage: **Searching Faith** (late adolescence)

- is asking questions.
- “Is this what I believe?” Thomas is our example of this. He won't blindly accept what others have said, but needs to find certainty for himself. This stage of faith building is adding the “head” to the “heart” of the earlier stages.

Westerhoff makes the statement, “that some people in the church have never had the benefit of an environment which encouraged **searching faith**. So they're often frightened or disturbed by adolescents who are struggling to enlarge and build their **experienced faith**.” It can be at this stage of searching, that people are pushed away from the church. Sadly, some never return and others remain in the **searching stage** the rest of their lives. Individuals in this searching faith stage need the support and love from their faith community and need to remain within the faith community and not be pushed away.

Though Thomas didn't believe and he was asking and questioning, he remained with the disciples. It was there he received the answers to his questions. This stage is important because it is at this stage of faith-building a person can move into unbelieving or move forward onto the next stage of faith...

3rd and final stage: **Owned Faith** (early adulthood)

- and it comes only through searching stage. After you explore the question “Is this what I believe?” you hopefully answer “Yes, this is what I believe.” This is the stage where Thomas ends up.

Thomas did not believe, he was questioning Christ's resurrection. Thomas wanted proof; he wanted evidence that would answer his question...

Let's return to our story, we are focusing on Jesus and Thomas. Jesus comes to the disciples, Thomas is present this time, he greets them “Peace be with you.” He says

to Thomas, “put your finger here and see my hands, reach out your hand and put it in my side, and believe! Don’t be unbelieving but believing!” Jesus moves Thomas from a position of unbelief to belief. Jesus meets the conditions Thomas has set in order for him to believe, for him to have faith. Christ offers himself to Thomas and moves Thomas from the searching stage to the stage of owned faith. Once Thomas owns his faith, he says I believe, and makes the most powerful confession made in John’s Gospel:… **“My Lord and my God!”** Thomas’ confession affirms the opening words of John’s Gospel; “The Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Thomas sees God revealed in Jesus Christ. Thomas has owned his faith…….

Jesus didn’t have to appear to Thomas and offer himself and show Thomas his hands and side, but he did. Jesus provided Thomas and the other disciples with faith. Jesus’ last statement is not intended to scold and shame Thomas. Christ has just provided Thomas and the rest of the disciples with the faith they needed. With his words “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” Jesus tells us that belief and faith will not be limited to those who have seen him. Mary, Thomas, and the rest of the disciples have witnessed the resurrected Christ and they are a source of faith to others. We are reassured that being a first-generation witness is not a prerequisite for faith. As Kory said last week, look around and see those around and you will see proof that being a first-generation witness is not a prerequisite…….

With all the stresses and challenges we face everyday; it is hard to imagine what our future holds. Some challenges we face seem so far beyond our reach that we just laugh at them with uncertainty. The unexpected circumstances life deals us can be so overwhelming that they’re almost too much to bear. The disciples were faced with an overwhelming circumstance of Jesus’ death. Their dreams for the future were shattered by Jesus’ crucifixion. They didn’t understand the meaning of Jesus’ death. What was the purpose of their three years of ministry with him? They couldn’t imagine the future because their leader was dead.

Yet, in the midst of this uncertainty Jesus appears to the disciples and Thomas and provides them with the faith they needed to continue their ministry with Jesus. We know the rest of the story and it includes us. The Risen Christ greets us “Peace be with You” and breathes upon us, giving us the Holy Spirit, empowering us to continue His ministry. Christ has provided us with the Faith we need to share the Good News.

So this story is not about a doubting Thomas, but a confessing Thomas. This story is about Faith. A story about searching for faith and then embracing an owned faith. Do you believe? Yes, then let’s keep dancing and shouting the Good News!